THE CAYAPA INDIANS*

by
Max Heimann

In the far north west of the Ecuadorian Republic there is a river named the Santiago. Near the village of Borbon it is joined by one of its tributaries, the Cayapa River. The Cayapa Indians, a harmless tribe consisting of no more than 2500 persons, live on the upper reaches of the Cayapa River and around its sources.

I have never been able to understand why they are called "uncivilized" and "savage." Would it be because they dress more simply, more comfortably, more suitably and cheaply than we European fashion slaves? Or would it be because they speak their own language, unknown to us, and because they do not know how to read and write and do not stuff their heads with the dead weight taught in schools and called "education"? Or even, would it be because they have other customs and manners as well as different moral concepts?

One thing is certain--the Cayapa are happy people, because they are more satisfied with their lot than we Europeans, who are so demanding and feel so superior with our conceit in our sham civilization, in the clothes prescribed for us by the tyrants of "fashion" and in the "wisdom" acquired in schools.

They frequently come to town in small groups of five to 20 persons. I have seen them many hundreds of times, but again and again I am delighted when I meet these small, but well-built and sturdy [282] figures. The men are not taller than 150-160 cm. (Translator--5 ft. to 5ft. 4 in.), while the women are barely 140 cm. (Translator--4 ft. 8 in.). Their skin is copper brown in color.

---

* The author, a business man, lived in Tumaco (southwest Colombia) for 35 years (1895-1930) and was German Vice-Consul for the Departamento Nariño from 1907 to 1930. Although he never actually visited Cayapa villages, he did have occasion to see and question groups of them "many hundreds of times," on their frequent visits to Tumaco. Apart from this, several of his employees have been in Cayapa villages and have given him reports. (K. Th. Preuss).

●[8] Left to themselves and untouched, the Cayapa are gay, content and happy. Politics and book knowledge do not trouble them. The forest, fields and rivers yield in abundance everything they need for living. They know all the medicinal herbs and roots of [p24] their region and know exactly which will protect them against snake bites and which one will cure their toothaches. The administration of the community is in good hands and does not cost anything; they do not have to pay taxes or tributes. They do not bother with what goes on in the cities of the white men and the outside world. Their main concerns are the instincts of nature, women and children, eating and drinking; they are indifferent to everything else, because they neither know nor understand it. Their simple and carefree life makes them happy--they are richer than we who, as a result of rushing and ambitious pushing, cannot find peace and happiness. They are happier in their ignorance than we, who proudly call our thin varnish of culture "civilization" and who scornfully characterize the Cayapa as "savages."